

## **Here! But What About Those Who are Not? Reinforcement among Chronically Absent Elementary Students, Its Effectiveness, and the Why Behind the Absences**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a description of an action research (AR) study done with chronically absent elementary school students. The AR sought to answer these questions: 1) do reinforcement and daily check-ins increase attendance and 2) why are some students absent? Related literature regarding attendance and the methods used for the study are described and addressed. Results of the study demonstrated that school counselor daily check-ins and reinforcement increased the attendance of these students. Reasons for absences during the AR study include illness and attending medical appointments.

**Keywords:** action research and school counselor, attendance interventions and school counselors, school counseling and parental interventions

Today's educational climate necessitates that professional school counselors (PSCs) measure and document the impact of their school counseling program. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) suggests that PSCs measure the impact of their program practices. A method often used to measure this impact is action research (AR). AR is information gathered and analyzed, by school stakeholders, to understand an identified area.

This information is then used to improve student learning (Mills, 2011). AR measures the effectiveness of

educational practices, and allows educators analyze and improve current practices. The negative impact of chronic absenteeism is far-reaching and well documented (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Learning cannot occur if children are absent and the importance of attendance is clear (Sheldon, 2007). Finding ways to combat absenteeism, especially at the primary grades, is of the upmost importance (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Therefore, a review of school attendance data by the PSC and administrators indicated that a large number of students had 15 or more unexcused absences; this problem signaled the need for an AR study of attendance at the school. A review of the literature frames understanding of absenteeism and effective interventions.

### **Literature Review**

The relationship between attendance and student achievement is well documented (Sheldon, 2007). Ford and Sutphen (1996) found that students with poor attendance struggle with academic and social tasks, and can ultimately become involved with the justice system. In addition, as adults, these students have higher rates of unemployment and live in poverty. Offering primary prevention efforts to improve attendance can avert these problems in school age children and adults.

A further motivation to improve attendance is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) component which requires students to attend a minimum number of days of the school year. Schools whose students meet this requisite number of days meet one benchmark of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status and ensure funding for the next academic year. Thus, attendance not only affects student learning outcomes but also the viability of the school's human and educational resources. These factors necessitate that PSC's find ways to ensure students attend school regularly. Robbins and Ratcliff (as cited in Best of ERIC, 1979) state that chronic absenteeism as early as kindergarten can lead to students not finishing high school and lower financial earnings in adulthood. They propose that if schools develop early interventions when truancy patterns emerge, they reduce the continuation of these negative outcomes. Furthermore, Loeber & Farrington (2000) reported that students may exhibit delinquent behaviors associated with chronic absenteeism at 12 years old or younger.

## Effective Attendance Programs

Commonly, schools implement programs that reinforce students with excellent attendance and use numerous incentive programs to accomplish this goal. Such reinforcement varies from certificates, pizza parties, lunch, or outside time with community helpers, to grade bonus percentages (De Leonibus as cited in Best of ERIC, 1978). These programs may reinforce high attendance rates for students with acceptable attendance records. However, schools must find ways to reach chronically absent students who have fallen behind academically and socially. The literature notes that positive reinforcement, small groups, counselor or social worker check- ins, as well as student and parent contracts (De Leonibus as cited in Best of ERIC, 1979) improve student attendance. Other strategies for reducing absenteeism are (Ford & Sutphen, 1996):

- ✓ Developing incentives;
- ✓ Making school more interesting and rewarding;
- ✓ Increasing communication with parents; and
- ✓ Supporting families in changing behaviors that contribute to absenteeism.

According to Baker (2000), small groups were effective among elementary students with chronic absenteeism throughout the duration of the group but only for that time. A parent component seems to be a critical piece to improving the attendance of these students (Sheldon, 2007).

## Parent Involvement

Combating absenteeism necessitates a comprehensive approach that involves several school stakeholders (Jacobs & Kritsonis, 2007). Parent involvement is crucial, especially at the elementary level, when students are dependent upon their parents for getting to the bus stop or to school. Two beneficial interventions that promote parental involvement include informing parents of the district's attendance policy and holding school-wide communications or parent workshops, which discuss the importance of attendance (Peek, 2009). Therefore, communication between the school and parents supports parental involvement.

## Causes of Absenteeism

The literature has explored the underlying causes of absenteeism. Dube and Orpinas (2009) found that students miss school to avoid schoolwork or undesirable social situations or to gain reinforcement such as parental attention. Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001) categorized four areas of chronic absenteeism: family factors, school factors, economic influences, and student variables. The literature suggests that parents of chronically absent students experienced chronic absenteeism during their school years (Robins & Ratcliff as cited in BEST of ERIC, 1979). Furthermore, Sheldon (2007) found parental beliefs, experiences and family financial status contribute to student absenteeism.

When families lack basic resources, have transient housing, lack reliable transportation, or work multiple jobs, they may have difficulty getting their students to school regularly (Baker, et al., 2001). The literature offers conflicting findings on the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and absenteeism. Dossoff (2009) reported that data from The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) suggested a correlation between chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and lower performance in first grade, even when the researchers accounted for variances in gender, ethnicity, or SES. Therefore, the literature does not offer definitive conclusions about the correlation between SES and chronic absenteeism.

## Methodology

### Participants

Eight first grade students (two girls and six boys) enrolled in a primary school in suburban Atlanta comprised the study's initial participants; two participants moved during the AR thus reducing the number of participants to six. The school has a large number of students receiving free and reduced lunch and holds Title I status. Seven of the students identified as Caucasian and one as Pakistani. The school's population is .4% American Indian or Alaskan Native; 4.4% Asian; 4.5% Multiracial; 15% Hispanic; 20% Black; and 54% Caucasian. The PI selected students based on their number of unexcused absences in the 2009-2010 school year. Each of these students had 10 or more unexcused absences according to the county's student information software. If the student demonstrated a similar pattern of

attendance for this school year (five or more absences by December), the PI contacted parents requesting permission for the students to participate in the AR; the PI included only students whose parents gave permission. The PI used a parent survey (see Appendix A) at the end of the intervention to ascertain reasons for absences, and attitudes toward school and attendance. The PI administered the survey over the phone with five of the six participant's parents. Because of language differences, the school's International Welcome Center provided a translator for the family which spoke Urdu.

### **Intervention Procedures**

The procedures for this AR study consisted of reinforcement, daily check-ins with students, and weekly small group meetings for eight weeks. The PI conducted check-ins daily to confirm the participant's presents and to learn about home and school morning routines. Each student placed a sticker on his or her calendar for that day to reinforce attendance. On Friday of each week, the students and PI met during a small group to go over calendars and to discuss attendance. Small group discussions and topics included 1) the number of days attended for the week; 2) strategies to improve morning routines; 3) strategies that promoted student healthiness and physical well-being; and 4) the benefits of school attendance.

Students with perfect attendance for the week chose a prize from the PI's treasure box. The treasure box included small trinkets such as key chains, bracelets, rubber balls, and other small items. At the end of the group intervention, students with no unexcused absences during the eight-week group had a celebration.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

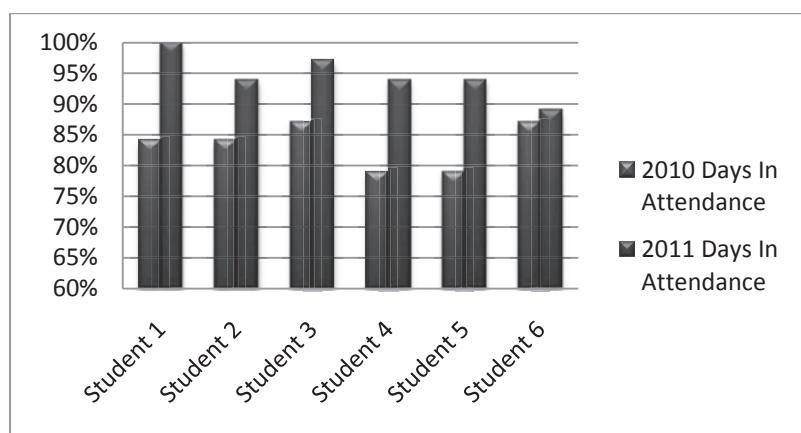
The researcher collected data regarding the intervention's impact on student's attendance from the county student information system. By comparing attendance data for the duration of the intervention (mid-January to mid-March 2011) to the same 39-day period for the 2009-2010 school year, the PI answered the first research question. The PI generated descriptive statistics in the form of percentages to describe changes in student attendance. Finally, the PI tallied frequency counts of student responses to group questions, parent survey responses, and reasons for student absences. The PI developed the parent survey

and there is no demonstrated reliability or validity data demonstrated. The PI kept qualitative data in the form of anecdotal notes on student and parent comments as well. The principal investigator (PI), who was also the school counselor in charge of the intervention, called each parent at the end of the intervention and asked survey questions over the phone.

## Results

Results indicate the effectiveness of reinforcement and daily check-ins in increasing the attendance of the six students who participated in the entire eight-week intervention. Overall, attendance improved with 82% of participants present at school to 94% of participants present. This represents a 12% increase in participant attendance. No students missed more than 4 days and one student missed zero days. The average increase in student attendance from the same period last year to this year was 11%. One student's attendance increased 16%; two students' attendance increased 15%; two students' attendance increased 10%; and one student's attendance increased 2% (see Figure 1). Collectively, the group had three unexcused absences during the intervention. All excused absences included doctors, dentist, or illness notes submitted by the parent. The group had 10 total absences, with three unexcused and seven excused.

Figure 1. Change in attendance after intervention (2010-2011)

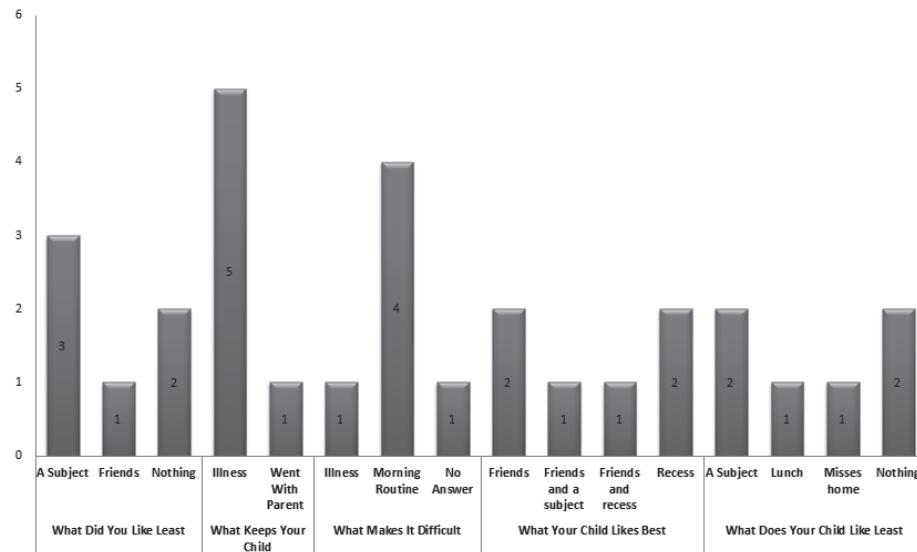


*Note:* This chart reflects total days in attendance percentages for the same eight-week periods in 2010 and 2011. Attendance rates increased for all students and the group increased an average of 11%.

## Survey Results

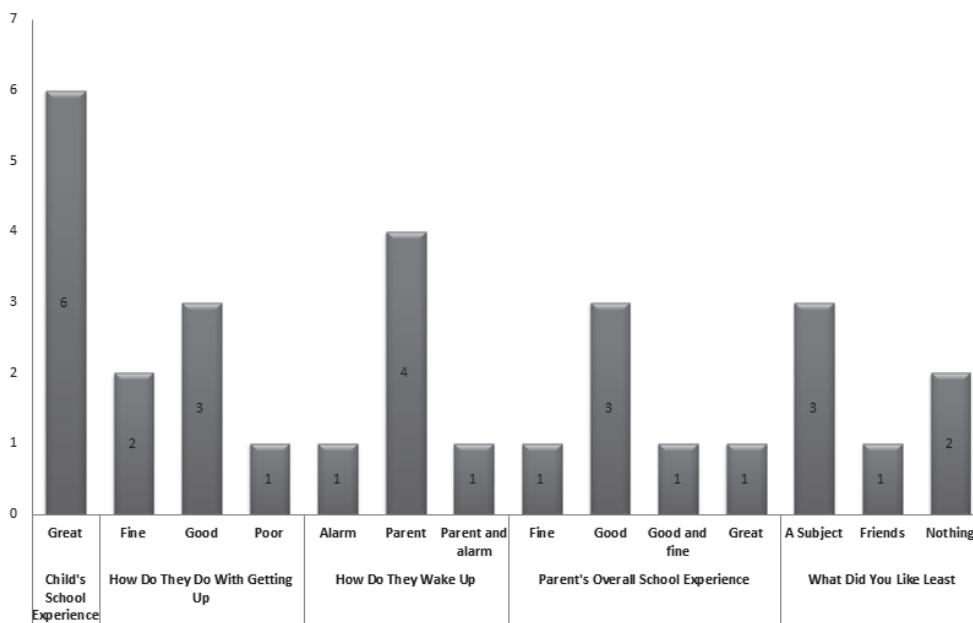
Parent survey responses indicated that their students miss school because of illness and difficult morning routines. One parent reported that his or her child missed school due to a non-school related event. Two reported that their children avoided school to miss class in certain subject. Parents also reported that their children liked recess, friends, and a teacher one reported the teacher as their child's favorite thing about school and that these factors encouraged the children to attend school. Four parents reported that their favorite thing about school was their friends, one said a particular subject, and one said the teacher (see Figure 2). Three students do good with getting up in the morning; two do fine; and one does poorly. All parents agreed that their child's school experience has been great so far (see Figure 3). The parents' least favorite things about school included a particular subject; two parents reporting nothing; and one reported that his or her child's friends are mean. Four parents rated their overall school experience as good; one ranked it fair; while another ranked it great. All parents and children had alarm clocks. An alarm wakes one child wakes and other parents report waking their children. Three parents reported that their children sometimes mention needing or wanting to be at school. One child often mentions it, one always mentions the need to attend school and one never mentions this (see Figure 4).

Figure 2. Survey responses questions 1 through 5



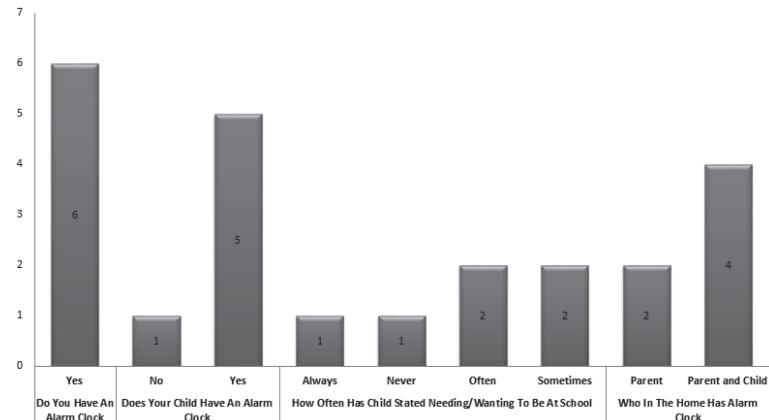
Note: Illness and difficult morning routines seemed to keep these students from attending school. Participants reported friendship as the best aspect of school.

Figure 3. Survey responses questions 6 through 10



Note: All parents stated their children's school experience has been great and most rated the overall school experience as good.

Figure 4. Survey responses questions 11 through 14



*Note:* All parents report having an alarm clock; five students have alarm clocks but report that parents awaken them.

During Friday groups, students shared ideas about the importance of attending school and strategies to stay healthy and attend school. Their answers regarding how to stay healthy included drinking water, exercising, playing, running, eating right, stretching, drinking milk, going to the doctor, brushing their teeth and playing baseball.

## Discussion

The effectiveness of the intervention may be attributable to many factors. First, the students enjoyed the daily check-ins, stickers, and the prizes. During the AR, parents seemed to communicate more frequently regarding absences and used a variety of methods to communicate with the school such as emails, notes, and visiting the school in person. The AR allowed the PSc to establish a stronger rapport with each of the students and their families. While the PI noticed closer relationships with most students and families, one family demonstrated more absences and early check-outs than other participants. The PI did not speak with this family prior to the AR and cultural and language differences exist between the PI and the family.

## Limitations

A greater number of participants would make the results more generalizable. Language barriers presented challenges getting one survey answered because the parents spoke Urdu and needed a translator. Indeed,

language barriers and student mobility are limitations that future investigators may encounter. The intervention and daily check-ins were time consuming and some school counselors might have a difficult time accomplishing this task. Administering the survey took much time because of difficulties reaching parents by phone and some families may not have phone access. Nevertheless, administering the survey via phone addressed concerns about lost or incomplete surveys students take home. One unexpected result included parental enthusiasm for the project and completing the survey on the phone.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers can repeat this project with multiple grade levels to add significantly to the study's utility. Moreover, the PI can shorten the survey and ask only a few questions about reasons for absences, changes in student motivation, and understanding of the school's attendance policy. Preparing for language barriers that might hinder parent communication or survey responses by working with translators could broaden the number of English Language Learners represented in the study. Finally, checking in with participants a couple of days a week, and offering reinforcement, would support students' school attendance. Weekly group meetings and incentives remain essential components of the plan.

## Summary and Conclusions

Chronic absenteeism has numerous negative implications. Far reaching, these implications touch everyone and include academic and social difficulties, dropping out of school, delinquency leading to justice system involvement, and lower financial earnings in adulthood.

The role of PSC provides unique opportunities to implement AR and programs that can improve student attendance. The field could benefit from additional research concerning SES as a contributor to absenteeism and effective interventions among chronically absent elementary students. The parental component and positive reinforcement seemed especially effective in this AR study. Causes and factors contributing to chronic absenteeism seem varied although in this study, parents commonly reported student illness as the reason for absences. Just as schools differentiate instruction for students, school could differentiate attendance programs in order to address diverse factors contributing to absenteeism.

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## Appendix A

### Parent Survey

Directions: Parents please select the one best answer to the following questions that most closely relates to your child and yourself.

1. What sometimes keeps your child from making it to school?
  - A. Child was ill
  - B. Child didn't feel like coming
  - C. Transportation issues – car or missed bus
  - D. Sibling or someone else in the family was sick
  - E. You took them with you somewhere.
2. What makes it difficult to get your child to school sometimes?
  - A. Morning routine
  - B. Child didn't feel like coming
  - C. Transportation issues
  - D. Sibling or someone else in the family was sick
  - E. Tiredness/oversleeping
3. What does your child like best about school?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/free time
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
4. What did you like best about your school or educational experience?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/free time
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
5. What does your child like least about school?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/free time
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
6. What did you like least about your school or educational experience?
  - A. Lunch
  - B. Friends
  - C. Recess/outside/freetime
  - D. Teacher
  - E. A particular subject
7. How would you describe your overall school experience?
  - A. Great
  - B. Good
  - C. Fine
  - D. Poor
  - E. Terrible
8. How would you describe your child's overall school experience at this point?
  - A. Great
  - B. Good
  - C. Fine
  - D. Poor
  - E. Terrible
9. How does your child do with getting up in the mornings?
  - A. Good
  - B. Fine
  - C. Poor
  - D. Terrible
10. How is your child awakened for school?
  - A. By you
  - B. By a sibling
  - C. By their alarm clock
  - D. Wakes on his/her own
11. Do you have an alarm clock? Yes No
12. Does your child have an alarm clock? Yes No
13. Who in the home uses an alarm clock each morning?
  - A. Parent
  - B. Child
  - C. Sibling
  - D. Grandparent
  - E. Other
14. How often has your child mentioned needing to be at school or getting up for school?
  - A. Never
  - B. Seldom
  - C. Sometimes
  - D. Often